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U.S. Paying the Price For Crippling the CIA

By JIM NICHOLSON

"Intelligence" is the dirty word of the late Sixties and Seventies.

During this country's 15-year period of self-flagellation we tried to stamp out intelligence gathering wherever and whenever we could. Civil libertarians, academia and the news media locked arms in a "holy crusade" to purge the menace from our midst.

Unfortunately, the purge succeeded to a degree locally and nationally. We are beginning to reap the libertarians' legacy in the Middle East. We don't really know who the hell has taken over our embassy in Tehran. Students? PLO-trained terrorists? KGB-sponsored operatives? We hear guesses. There may be other possibilities, but I won't know until I go home and check with my 11-year-old son Jeffrey. He guesses too.

On April 13, 1978, CIA Director Stansfield Turner said the Soviet Union had fallen seriously behind the U.S. in the technical aspects of intelligence. He said satellites and other devices have enhanced the CIA's ability to gather information on a global scale. I put this hardware on a level with the polygraph (lie detector). Polygraph information is on a par with what you get from a wino at 5th and Vine by slipping him a fin. It may be helpful, but I would not stake my reputation or my life on it. It is an investigative aid, nothing conclusive, except for the sick, lame or lazy investigator.

This is the same Stansfield Turner who tried to fire 800 experienced field agents from the CIA's covert activities section in August 1977. Eleven months later, Turner quietly rescinded that order amid Congressional and public outcry. He fired only about 100 — that we know of. But Turner's original message and direction was clear enough.

It is too bad that during the planning sessions for the embassy takeover Turner's spy in the sky and other fancy hardware couldn't have bugged that student coffeehouse in Tehran, or "turned" one or two Iranians sitting in on that meeting to report back to us. But it would have required men and women in the field to perform these tasks.

Men and women make mistakes, sometimes in basic judgement, while blind to all but the objective. The CIA and every other intelligence gathering agency in this country has been made to pay for these mistakes. Not only did the civil libertarians and media get their pound of flesh, they went on to try to break every bone in the body.

Court suits and congressional and executive actions heaped limitations on the CIA, FBI and local police departments. The litany of restrictions need not be repeated again. But we should take another look at the results.

Last year a ranking FBI official in Philadelphia confided: "Our files have been ordered virtually cleaned out by court order and bureau directives since 1974 regarding terrorist groups. If the Green (Federal) building blew up right now, about all we would have to start with on the investigation would be to start sifting through the rubble."

Incredibly, President Carter had upbraided the CIA for not forecasting the Shah's overthrow, even though he ordered the agency not to spy on our friends. That "allies don't spy on allies" argument won't wash. It was Israeli intelligence that tailed Andy Young to that clandestine PLO meeting last year. It was Carter who personally ordered an end to covert internal political operations across the board. It was also Carter who hand-picked old Annapolis classmate Turner to run the U.S. intelligence community.

Carter's sensitive, humanitarian approach to intelligence was in character with the anti-Washington, anti-establishment platform that got him into office. Along the way he became a laughingstock among the intelligence professionals. It's no longer funny. In Afghanistan we are apparently relying heavily on refugee goat-herders for estimates of Russian tanks because we have no spies inside the country.

But the President was, as they say, going with the flow. Reflecting the consensus, the national mood which — thanks to the media — has been anti-intelligence.

I remain amazed, though, that one information-gathering operation escaped the purge unscathed. One which I worked with and for at various intervals, and not always proudly.

It is a crack intelligence network with several hundred — field operatives strategically placed around the country. This outfit could — and did — produce outstanding phony ID on a moment's notice and push through bogus vouchers for surveillance equipment.

One supervisor didn't even blink when he ordered one operative to plant electronic eavesdropping devices in a government office. From the field I could do an instant background on a subject with a phone call.

Support personnel at headquarters could tap into a computerized crossfile for a printout, bolster that with a voluminous manual file and plug into headquarters experts familiar with the subject who could render a personal feel for the subject.